Kenyon College

Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture

Volume 7 | Issue 4 420-430

2021

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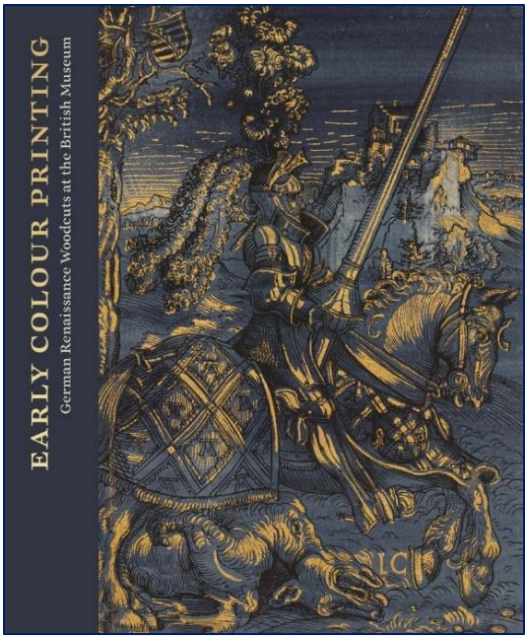
PEREGRINATIONS
JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOLUME VII, NUMBER 4 (AUTUMN 2021)



Review: Elizabeth Savage, *Early Colour Printing: German Renaissance Woodcuts at the British Museum* (The British Museum, Paul Holberton Publishing, 2021), 240 pp., 153 color and 2 black and white images, bibliography and index; $65 (hardback); ISBN 9781911300755.

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This beautifully accessible, exhibition-style catalogue marks Elizabeth Savage's latest installment in her reinvention of early modern color printing history. Gorgeously produced and illustrated in full-page color with numerous detailed views, it persuasively argues for a more inclusive narrative of pre-1600 Germanic color woodcuts. Savage's approach accommodates book illustrations and wall calendars along with the bravura coloristic effects of single-sheet prints that fueled connoisseurial battles between members of the nobility. As Savage notes (p. 11), most of the hundreds of surviving color woodcuts are actually book illustrations; many of those are title page

borders. While book printers had long capitalized on the fact that woodblocks could be combined directly with letterpress, making black and white illustration comparatively easy once a block was in hand, adding color layers required careful registration during subsequent printing steps. While technically feasible, the added cost of printing in precious materials like silver or gold favored by the Emperor Maximilian and others required even more careful handling. **(Cover Image)** Hinting at this ostentatious materiality, the embossed gold foil lettering spelling out "EARLY COLOUR PRINTING" on the cover and spine of Savage's book is particularly elegant companion to Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1507 *Saint George* in black and gold on deep blue (indigo) paper in which his monogram appears in the gold printing layer alone. **Figure 1**, Hans Wechtlin's *Skull in a Frame* of 1510-13, leers from the back cover in subtler gray-greens, in what is perhaps now one of the most iconic early modern color prints, but which was originally meant for the smallest of audiences.

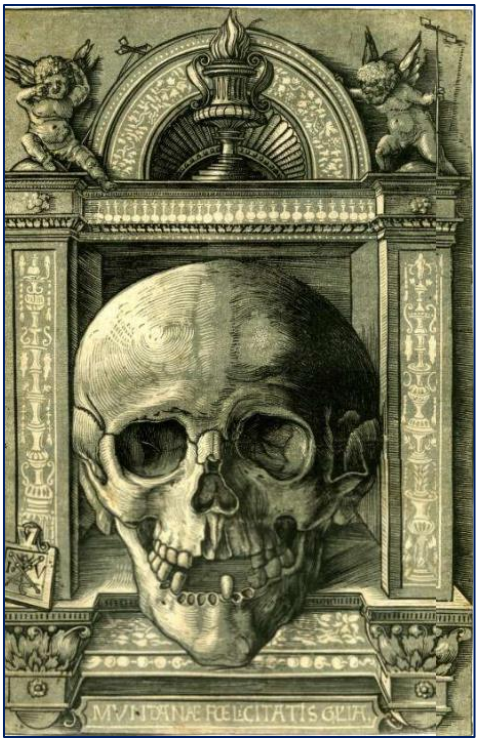

Figure 1 Hans Wechtlin, *Skull in a Frame*, woodcut in black and gray-green, 1510-1513 (1834,0804.38). Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Savage's book opens with prefatory notes and a pithy introduction defining the German color

print as an image printed in an key block outline (usually in black), followed by one or more additional color blocks, or an image printed in a monochromatic color other than black. The introduction also includes a helpful reference table to the standard literature as well as more recent, online sources for readers seeking further context. Nine chapters, each beginning with a single page of thematic discussion, lead into 82 entries on prints, which are mainly color-printed woodcuts from German-speaking areas of 15th-early 17th-century Europe. The book concludes with a concise, current bibliography and index. The chapters are arranged roughly chronologically, and Savage begins by treating the need for color and printers's initial solutions, such as hand-coloring (1). Then she introduces German color printed woodcuts via the British Museum collection. Her account of their holdings begins in 1482 with the still art-historically underappreciated printer Erhard Ratdolt, and builds up to the 1509 printing rivalry between Lucas Cranach the Elder and Hans Burgkmair and their sparring patrons, the Elector Frederick the Wise and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian (2). Next, Savage discusses the early 16th-century color printing innovations of Imperial Augsburg focusing again on Hans Burgkmair, especially the *Lovers Surprised by Death* in its many color variations (3) and in Strasbourg, featuring the erotic and erudite duo of Hans Balding Grien with his *Witches* and Hans Wechtlin's *Skull* **(Fig. 1)** (4). More attentive to social-history, the next sections address functional categories of color printing for devotion before the Reformation (5) and after it (6). The most innovative chapter

discusses a group of extremely rare color prints intended for use as wall decorations mimicking intarsia wood inlays (7). The next section details late uses of "German chiaroscuro" (made with a self-sufficient key block, usually in black rather than pure tone) into the 1600s including Tobias Stimmer's reproductions of two *c*. 1230 sculptures of *Ecclesia and Synagoga* from the Strasbourg cathedral (8). Finally, the book ends where it began with revivals of old master color prints that reach into the 19th century while copying works by Cranach and coloristically augmenting woodblocks by Dürer **(Fig. 2)** (9).

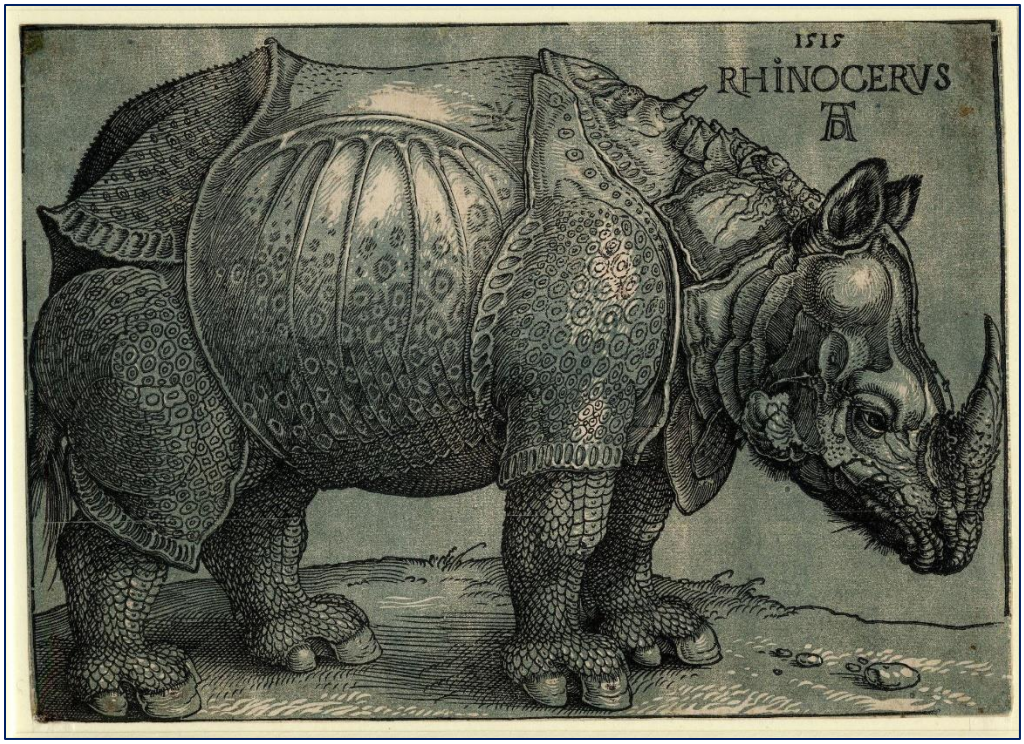

Figure 2 Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinocervs*, original block in black, 1515, and Willem Janszoon Blau, tone block in grayish blue, seventh edition, *c*. 1620. (1913,1015.110). Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The first section on early color in prints grounds the book in the necessary precursors of prints left unfinished in expectation of devotional hand-coloring for the blood of Christ, white-line block carving where no white ink is used (but the resulting

lighting still borders on bold chiaroscuro effects), and prepared color grounds for more drawing-like prints using a single woodblock. It also shows one of the earliest uses of applied metal flakes (effectively glitter) as well as mica and quartz, in a genre now known as the tinsel print. Books like Hartmann Schedel's 1497 "Nuremberg Chronicle" were available in black and white or, at a higher cost, hand colored or illuminated, and single-sheet prints with an added tone block coexisted with uncolored key block impressions, an option that was unavailable to the slightly later Italian chiaroscuro tonal approach.

Several standout artists and printers recur throughout the book and covers: the well-known tonal effects of Burgkmair, Cranach, Balding Grien, and Wechtlin. The contributions of visionary yet often invisible publishers Erhard Ratdolt and (to a lesser extent) Jost de Negker (possibly fig. 3) appear less prominently in art-historical literature, even though without them many of these innovations might have never have succeeded. Rather closely-trimmed images of pages from Ratdolt's 1489 printing of Leopold of Austria's astronomical text (**fig. 4** below), a missal, Ratdolt's printer's mark and five other books are featured here, the latter as the image introducing Chapter 5. Unlike the 1903-11 catalog by British Museum print cataloguer and later Keeper, Campbell Dodgson, Albrecht Dürer is nearly absent except as an influence and a matrix to be revitalized with a color tone block in blue or green for further sales of his 1515 *Rhinocervs*. **(Fig. 2)** As Savage makes perfectly clear, this was not a color print Dürer

produced in 1515, but it became one in the edition by Dutch publisher Willem Janszoon Blaeu around 1620. "Colour impressions of this print are traditionally considered an example of sixteenth-century German printmaking, but this is inaccurate because the tone blocks were made in seventeenth-century Holland" (p. 214). The distinction between Italianate and German chiaroscuro woodcuts from this period is another corrective Savage makes early on, noting that the woodcuts with the black outline or key block used in Germany are not only not inferior to the purely tone-block based woodcuts by the privilege-holder Ugo da Carpi and others beginning around 1516, but they actually preceded and influenced the Italian version.

While born of a 2015 British Museum exhibition that Savage also curated, this expanded volume tacitly engages with Campbell Dodgson's legacy. Sadly under-illustrated with 15 images to the current volume's whopping 155, Dodgson's 1903-1911 *Catalogue of Early German and Flemish Woodcuts Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum* remains a key overall source for this world-class collection, and Savage's book is a very welcome extension of it. Indeed, 26 prints featured in the Savage catalog had already been given to the British Museum by Sir William Mitchell in 1895. And all but five of the color prints she includes were acquired before Dodgson retired in 1932. That three others are his own donations suggests Dodgson would have been much in favor of Savage's specialized area of study, as well as of this volume. The department of prints and drawings traditionally included

relatively few books (these were relegated to the printed books department, which would in 1973 become part of the separate British Library). Yet Dodgson's account of the overall early German and Dutch print collection dedicates a separate section to the eight complete and fragmentary hand-printed and often hand-colored blockbooks in the collection, and another to illustrations very literally taken from 39 15th-century books. The second part of the catalog integrates 16th-century book illustrations with other works by their artists, including the already well-traversed illustrated works by Albrecht Dürer (Josef Meder's *Dürerkatalog* would not appear in print until 1932, but volume II of Dodgson's *Catalogue* already included a concordance with Bartsch).

The current Assistant Keeper of Dutch and Flemish Prints and Drawings before 1880, Olenka Horbatsch situates the reader to this history in her forward, confirming that it was Dodgson himself who cataloged the Germanophilic collector Sir Mitchell's 1895 donation of 1,290 prints and 163 books. Only one of his books made it into Savage's catalogue, but it is truly stunning. Seemingly nearly three-dimensional, this boldly shadowed coat of arms title page illustration was made for Emperor Maximilian's imperial advisor, the then Salzburg Cardinal Matthäus Lang. **(Fig. 3)** It is perhaps the most complicated color print of the era, consisting of seven blocks in as many colors, including, like the Cranach *Saint George*, actual gold ink (Cat. 22).

Lang was no stranger to seeing prints in color, having been the beneficiary of an incredibly long and illuminated horoscope-instrument woodcut produced by Hans

Springinklee about eight years prior (Albertina, Vienna), but the sparkling effect of the bejeweled cross that seems to hover above the shield here is remarkable and nearly an improvement on illumination. Savage has widely studied the rare surviving

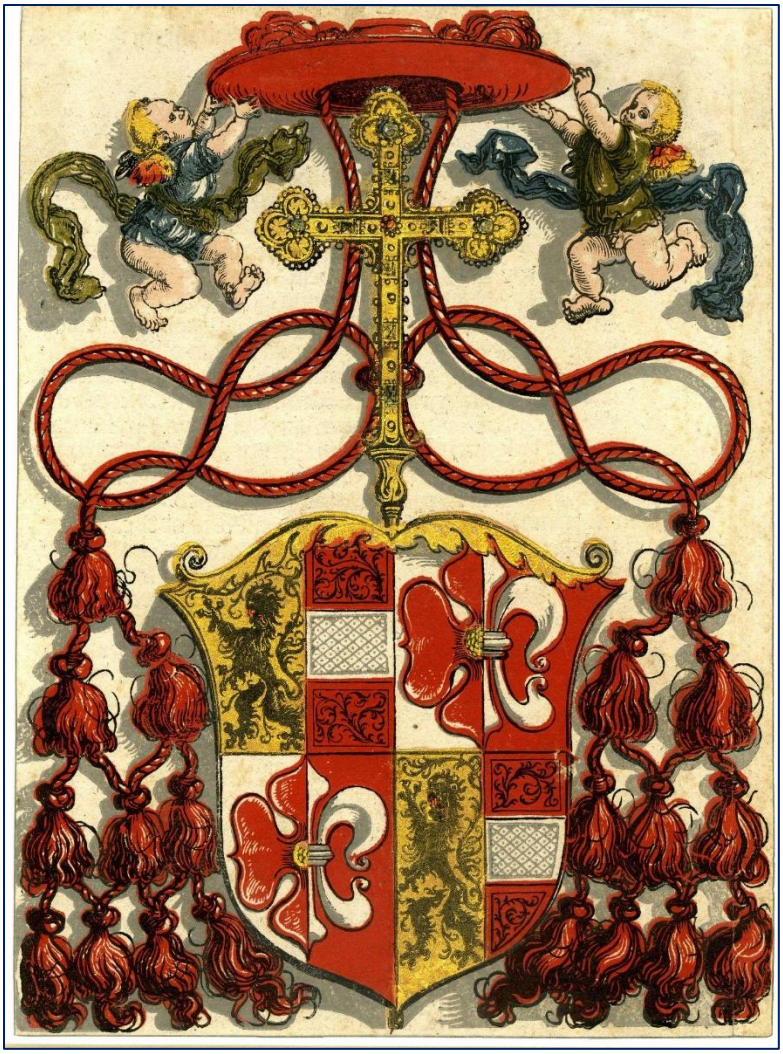

Figure 3 Hans Weiditz, possibly designed by Jost de Negker, Cardinal Matthäus Lang's *Coat of Arms* as the frontispiece to Ludwig Senfl, 'Liber selectarum cantionum quas vulgo mutetas appellant sex quinque et quatuor vocum,' Augsburg: Grimm and Wirsung, 1520. Color woodcut printed from seven blocks, the tone blocks in red, blue, green, gray, pink and gold (1895,0122.409) Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 4 Cropped and uncropped views of the 'Orbits of Venus' and 'Solar Orbits,' black and red woodcuts in Leopold of Austria, *Compilatio Leupoldi ducatus Austrie filij de astrorum scientia Decem continens tractatus* (Augsburg, Erhard Ratdolt) 1489. (1852,0214.543). Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

impressions of gold printings from this period, and has discovered several with gold elements that were erroneously thought to have been hand colored, such as the 1519 Charles V portrait (cat. 21), likely also the work of Jost de Negker in Augsburg.

Perhaps the only way to improve Savage's gorgeous volume would have been to depict the illustrations in books in a way more consistent with their expanded inclusion in the narrative. Comprising an impressive 26 of the 82 overall catalog entries, there is nonetheless great difficulty in distinguishing these images from the single-sheet publications produced for different audiences. For instance, a page of music from Peter Schöffer's 1518 *Graduale* (Cat. 44) or two pages from a liturgical calendar from Stöffler's *Calendarium Romanum* of the same year (Cat. 45) are very different objects from ephemeral wall calendars (Cat. 50), but here all three are shown in the same way as an *ex-libris* print that is meant to be pasted into a book to identify its owner (Cat 56) or a single-sheet print meant for a collector's album. While the history of matting cut-out illustrations and treating them as separate prints goes back even earlier than Dodgson's catalog, this aesthetic choice of digitally cropping the pages from bound volumes (perhaps a decision made at the behest of the publisher) further confuses the issue. The inclusion of the VD16 numbers in relevant entries allows intrepid readers to seek out a complete copy of the book to see the pages in context, but probably relatively few will make the effort. **Figure 4** shows one such image in both its cropped state, and as it appears in the British Museum's online catalog, where both the binding and white balance card remain visible. For a project that presumably required extensive new photography, it would have been even better to have retained a bit more of the physical context, especially for Erhard Ratdolt's printerly innovations.

Regardless of the way specialists might wish these sheets to be depicted, *Early Colour Printing* remains an important achievement. Does the British Museum collection and by extension, Savage's book tell the complete story of early modern German color printing? There are few collections that could get so close with almost exclusively their own holdings. The high production quality of this book, in no small part due to the copious illustrations and minute detail images, would have been difficult without a cooperative institution waiving image rights costs. It is both a necessary corrective to Dodgson and other older catalogs, and a needed overview of the field as it continues moving forward. The entries on each object build towards a conclusion as its emphasis on chronology and local production ebbs and flows, taking time to emphasize different social and cultural aspects of the color woodcut production. Covid slowed down the publication of this admirable project, but it was worth the wait, especially as it is likely that few scholars from across the pond will be able to see these prints and book illustrations again in person for quite some time. For readers looking for even more detail about German color prints in their broader European context, see Savage's 2015 volume co-edited with Ad Stijnman, *Printing Colour 1400-1700: History, Techniques, Functions and Receptions*, and her forthcoming volume co-edited with Margaret Morgan Grasselli, *Printing Colour 1700-1830: History, Techniques, Functions and Receptions* from Oxford University Press. ❧